



William O'Brien Arcade

New Tipperary, 1890, Robert French. National Library of Ireland, Call Number L_ROY_02571

building resistance, photographing dissent

Feargal Fitzpatrick

National College of Art and Design, Dublin, Ireland. Department of Fine Art Media
fitzpatrickf@staff.ncad.ie

In early 1890, Robert French took a series of photographs of New Tipperary, in southern Ireland. The town was newly built for hundreds of tenants from the Smith-Barry estate, who left their homes, businesses and farms during conflict with the landlord. The centerpiece of the new town's architecture was a shopping arcade, which included a covered market space. French's images of the new town represent an intersection between architectural, political and national discourses. Each photographic image exists as commodity and as visual representation. This unstable double function is the point of departure for this paper, which elaborates on this schema using French's New Tipperary images –and proposes some productive ways in which the images can be understood. When the New Tipperary project ran out of funds and ultimately failed in 1892, the arcade was demolished. French's photographs remain as spectral manifestations of its architecture as political resistance.

keywords Photography, Architecture, Ireland, New Tipperary, Arcade, 1890, Land war, Landscape, Plan of Campaign, Robert French, Lawrence Studio, Walter Benjamin, Phantasmagoria, W.J.T. Mitchell, Karl Marx, Commodity

introduction

In early 1890, Robert French took a series of photographs of New Tipperary, in southern Ireland. The town was built for hundreds of tenants from the Smith-Barry estate, who left their homes, businesses and farms during conflict with the local landlord. These images represent an intersection between architectural, political and national discourses. What follows is an outline of some productive ways in which this intersection can be understood.

A feature of critical scholarship, especially since the 1920s, has been a focus on photography's capacity to mislead, misrepresent and be misunderstood. I suggest that instead we can understand photographic images in a contingent mode and read photographs in all their complication –historical, material, ideological and formal. This process allows one to recognise the elusiveness and mutability of photographic meaning. A valuable conceptual model is that of Stan Smith, in his foreword to Raymond Williams' seminal book: "*What The Country and the City* attempts, throughout, in pursuing 'both the persistence and the historicity of concepts', is to cut 'particular cross-sections' through the historical process, finding in each immediate conjuncture the 'specific contents and histories' of lived experience"¹.

The discussion of built environments, particularly the townscape of Tipperary/New Tipperary shares some key characteristics with scholarly accounts of landscape –in terms of how the landscape is read, but also how photographic representations of it are produced, circulated, presented and interpreted. Simon Schama argues that:

[Landscapes] are culture before they are nature [...] once a certain idea of landscape, a myth, a vision, establishes itself in an actual place, it has a peculiar way of muddling categories, of making metaphors more real than their referents; of becoming, in fact, part of the scenery².

W. J. T. Mitchell proposes a counterpoint to Schama:

I must [also] contrast my approach here to that of Simon Schama [...] These approaches to landscape, what one might call the depth model, while clearly of great importance, are exactly antithetical to my notion of landscape in terms of a surface model. That is, I am concerned with images, representation, and stereotypes of landscape that, while often demonstrably false and superficial, nevertheless have considerable power to mobilize political passions³.

Mitchell describes landscape imaging as "the dream-work of ideology"⁴. In both approaches, meaning-making is predicated on continual and contingent engagement with a range of mystifications. What is central is the production of ideologically-charged meanings⁵. It is helpful to look first at New Tipperary's architecture, and then at its photographic representations.

the buildings

In the late 1880s the Ponsonby estate, near Youghal, in County Cork became the front line in the *Plan of Campaign* led by the Irish National League⁶. The League was a large organisation agitating for lower rents, and for the rights of small farmers to purchase land via rents paid. It was also predicated on the ideal of separatist Irish nationalism. The campaign supported the tenants in a rent strike, with rent paid to the National League rather than to the landlord. The League then supported tenants who were evicted or otherwise victimised –bringing the Ponsonby estate to a crisis point in 1889.

Arthur Hugh Smith-Barry was an Irish landlord, owning thousands of acres in Cork and Tipperary⁷. He became the head of a government-supported landlord syndicate aiding the Ponsonby estate in facing down the campaign –by acquiring the estate and evicting the tenants. As a result, Smith-Barry's own estate in Tipperary town (61km away) became a target for the campaign. Smith-Barry's Tipperary tenants went on rent strike in July 1889, led by local

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priests and businessmen⁸. The most dramatic aspect of the action was the migration of the tenants from their homes and businesses to newly-constructed buildings just outside of the town⁹. Building work, financed by the National League, commenced on November 18th 1889¹⁰.



f1_Map of Ireland

The project attracted international attention and, in early 1890, Dublin's Lawrence studio sent Robert French to photograph what became known as *New Tipperary*¹¹. The centrepiece of New Tipperary was the William O'Brien Arcade¹². The arcade, and much of New Tipperary, was designed by architect Robert Gill¹³. New Tipperary's design was a modern intersection of capital and architecture, a high-tech commercial space for a revolutionary social formation –while at the same time serving local agrarian and social imperatives¹⁴. Walter Benjamin describes arcades as house-rows or corridors that have no exterior, and no external existence. This he compares with the structure of reverie: "Arcades are houses or passages having no outside –like the dream"¹⁵. Esther Leslie, in discussing Benjamin's *Arcades Project* states "The arcade was the Ur-form, the originary form, of modernity, for it incubated modes of behaviour –distraction, seduction by the commodity spectacle, shopping as leisure activity, self-display– that would come to figure more prominently as the century passed into the next". New Tipperary's arcade was built at a point when arcades were already being superseded by department stores in metropolitan centres. It was already a legacy form, but new and revolutionary in this context. Its function was not a sheltered space for the urbane flâneur, but rather a material resistance to the privately-owned streets of the nearby country town.

The dream is a pervasive theme in Benjamin's project¹⁶. It's central to his idea of phantasmagoria –a process through which individuals are distracted from the material circumstances of their lives by the allure of the commodity, reducing them to mere consumers– a de-humanising process in Marxian terms. Susan Buck-Morss summarises one of Benjamin's key concerns: "The visible theoretical armature of the *Passagen-Werk* is a secular, sociopsychological theory of modernity as a dreamworld, and a conception of collective 'awakening' from it as synonymous with revolutionary class consciousness"¹⁷. Benjamin connects the cityscape to the experience of passing through it, which promotes consumption: "The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city is transformed for the flâneur into phantasmagoria. This phantasmagoria, in which the city appears now as a landscape, now as a room, seems later to have inspired

the décor of department stores, which thus put *flânerie* to work for profit¹⁸. In this model, the Tipperary arcade embeds its revolutionary momentum within what Benjamin describes as the “enthronement of the commodity” –an indication that Irish revolutionary inclinations were more bourgeois than proletarian¹⁹.

The William O'Brien Arcade manifested a set of contradictions. It was: modern in its context, but already superseded in metropolitan centres; an urban statement built in an Irish field; framed by revolutionary thought, but prefiguring a bourgeois revolt; galvanised by collective community resistance, but politically precarious; intensely localised in its energy, but subject to wider national and international narratives. To this conceptually complex new architectural space, photography brings complication.



f2_William O'Brien Arcade,
L_ROY_02572

the photographs

In step with photography's wider commoditisation and industrialisation, French's photographs of New Tipperary became sources for illustrations in pamphlets and news journals, as well as slide and print reproductions for sale²⁰. It was the development of the halftone image (in 1880) that suddenly transformed the photograph into a mass-produced ephemeral commodity within print media²¹. For the first time, photographs were produced with an intentionally short life span. These 'throw-away' print images lacked the aura of the treasured image-object, but widened the scope of photography's communicative power. A central conceptual problematic of the photographic image is, in Marxian terms, one of its most important qualities. That is, the commodity fetish obscures the material relationships between human beings, but the photo-commodity (print, postcard, slide, news-photo) does so while ostensibly communicating facts through its indexical image surface²². The photograph simultaneously reveals and conceals reality. It functions in a semantic hall of mirrors. The commodity form's doubling of the image's mystificatory power is at the core of this problematic.

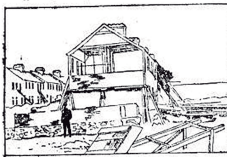
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mart, and two streets, one of two-storied residential houses, the other of shops; the first nearly finished as far as roofing in, the other not so advanced. The mart looks somewhat like an agricultural show building, with its long glass lantern roof, and is a first-rate structure. The walls three-fourths of the way up are of stone, the remaining portion

brick. Inside the building is divided on each side into twelve good-sized stalls, intended for evicted shopkeepers. The residential houses are constructed of timber framing with double sheeting lined with felt or other suitable substance; the partition walls are of brick, and roofs slated. The work looks clean and well carried out. The shops in course of building will be brick throughout. Altogether, counting shops and houses, there are, in addition to the mart, about forty houses built or laid out on this piece of ground. On the road adjoining a few additional shops are built, in one of which the Singer Sewing Machine Company's agent is established. At the other end



NEW TOWN'S STREET OF COTTAGES.



NEW TOWN'S SECOND STREET IN COURSE OF CONSTRUCTION.

of the town, known as the Spittal end, twenty-seven three-roomed cottages have been built on the same system as the houses described, and are already tenanted by evicted families. Thus, in all, some seventy houses have been built up to the present, or are in course of erection. It will thus be seen that the "new town" is not a mere

f3_Illustrations, based on French's photographs

published in the Pall Mall Gazette (a London newspaper), dated 3 April 1890

Recall Mitchell's argument, where landscape imaging is "the dream-work of ideology". For him, this is simultaneously a "symptom of the rise of capitalism" and a "screening off" of violence perpetrated to physically secure a site²³. Mitchell frames his argument in the context of the renewed theoretical interest in landscape studies, occurring in the 1970s and 80s, where conservative aesthetic concerns were challenged by materialist analyses of Romantic landscape painting. These newer accounts argued that the images (landscape oil paintings mostly) were produced for the owners of the spaces depicted and, serving the ideological imperatives of the brief, necessarily hid the contentious histories of land acquisition processes (invasion, colonisation, enclosure and so on)²⁴. One interpretation of Mitchell's "screening off" involves two elements of Sigmund Freud's work on psychic life – "dream work" and "screen-memory". Anthony Storr summarises Freud's term as

the mental processes, or 'dream-work', by which the dream was modified and rendered less disturbing. These processes included condensation, the fusing together of different ideas and images into a single image; displacement, in which a potentially disturbing image or idea is replaced by something connected but less disturbing; [and] representation, the process by which thoughts are converted into visual images²⁵.

French's images condense the local tenant struggle, the national land campaign, and the separatist nationalist movement into a pictorial framing of localised political dissent – while their individual formal elements construct their own internal narrative arcs. In their condensation, the images displace the unstable day-to-day political context, where UK government forces and massive capital power are arraigned against the tenants. Some of the conservative forces' tools were police intimidation, surveillance and violence, caught up in a vicious cycle with street protests and Roman Catholic hierarchy involvement.

From the archive, the images were put to work in their multiple commodity contexts. Each of these contexts was spatially and temporally removed from the sites of the images' construction (this is one of the most obvious and commonplace observations about how photographs work, but remains a central issue). Alongside textual and verbal accounts of events, photographs became evidence, proof and a form of memory. Here, Mitchell's screening concept invokes Freud's description of a linked idea: "Such a memory, whose value consists in the fact that it represents thoughts and impressions from a later period and that its content is connected with these by links of a symbolic or similar nature, is what I would call a *screen-memory*"²⁶. In Freud's formulation, the screen serves the present and insulates the subject from past trauma. While Freud's ideas refer to the psychic life of the individual, it is useful to expand on them in order to suggest an understanding of collective encounters with the photographic.



f4. New Tipperary

Dillon Street, 1890, Robert French. National Library of Ireland, Call Number L_ROY_02573

There are three essential differences between Mitchell's 'skeptical' accounts of Romantic landscape painting and a productive discussion of these photographs. Firstly, French's images were not made to order by the owners/occupiers of the spaces depicted –so an ideology of the image cannot be securely anchored. Secondly, the images were not produced to be viewed and discussed solely by sympathetic friends of those involved –making the semantic charge of the image mutable. Lastly, given the reproducibility of photographs, they were not controlled as unique artifacts in the market –they were commodities circulated and exchanged, further complicating their narrative power at each viewing. However, what connects these images to Mitchell's ideas, are the dream-like properties of the photographic image, and its capacity to conceal as much as it reveals.

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Also consistent is the screen-memory function, where at each site of presentation and reception, the audience brings its own circumstances to bear on the interpretation of the image surface –projecting onto the image, and obscuring aspects of its 'original' production. Any interpretation of the image (however strongly supported by textual and contextual prompts) becomes a newly constructed, and partially shared, memory of an event indirectly experienced.

conclusion

To read these images is to make a statement about the past and, necessarily, about the present. We view them through the prism of our contemporary experience, our knowledge of the events in the intervening time period, and our own ideological positions. The rebellious tenants of the Smith-Barry estate in Tipperary awoke from one set of historic circumstances through building a new physical space for their daily lives. Their strength was in local, national, religious and diasporic solidarity. The arcade was not innovative at the time, but was novel in its context. In Marxian terms the arcade building represents a dialectical political awakening, but remains within the frame of commodity capitalism, religious adherence and romantic idealism. In this formulation it remains within Benjamin's phantasmagoric dream-world, and blind to a materialist understanding of social relations.

French's images enact Mitchell's dream-work of Freudian condensation, displacement and representation. They communicate some facts of the time's political dissent, but the dynamics of material relations are doubly screened from view. Each reader encounters this screening-off, which entangles the photographic image. New productive readings require a contextual archaeology, bringing into play a critical component –blowing the dust from a fresh historiographical cross-section in order to establish what can be understood– to attempt to draw back the screen and to awake from the dream.



f5_New Tipperary

Dillon Street, 1890, Robert French. National Library of Ireland, Call Number L_ROY_02571

In the end, French's images are almost all that remains of the William O'Brien arcade. During 1891, as financial support for New Tipperary dried up, many tenants capitulated and returned to their tenancies under Smith-Barry²⁷. In July of that year, Smith-Barry gained legal control over the arcade building, and obtained permission for its removal. It was subsequently demolished, beginning early on the morning of August 11th 1892²⁸. Driven by national and international politics, the townspeople were forced to give up on their short-lived utopia. The arcade's space of reverie was shaken out of existence. However, the attempt to turn back the arrow of time was futile. The New Tipperary experiment had proven that the National League's objectives could be achieved more fully where mass support could be achieved and maintained. The arcade's demolition was a vain attempt to destroy its politics, but its spectral images lingered. Their presence in the archive helped to further propagate the ideals of Irish romantic nationalism as it gained in strength and reach.

Benjamin writes: "The new, dialectical method of doing history teaches us to pass in spirit –with the rapidity and intensity of dreams– through what has been, in order to experience the present as a waking world, a world to which every dream at last refers"²⁹. In Benjamin's reawakened world, these images do not simply represent the moment's history –they *are* its history. At the height of the project's energy and optimism, William O'Brien described New Tipperary as "a sort of Mecca to the pilgrims of Irish nationality"³⁰ –a description synthesising location, space, religion and politics into stone, brick, iron, wood and glass.

endnotes

1. Williams vi.
2. Schama, 61.
3. Mitchell, 195.
4. Ibid., 7.
5. For the purposes of this discussion Gayatri Spivak's definition of ideology is useful: "Ideology in action is what a group takes to be natural and self-evident, that of which the group, as a group, must deny any historical sedimentation. It is both the condition and the effect of the constitution of the subject (of ideology) as freely willing and consciously choosing in a world that is seen as background", 118.
6. For a discussion of the National League, see Foster, 415-419. For further information on the Ponsonby estate, see the National University of Ireland Galway, Landed Estates Database.
7. 19,000 acres at Fota in Cork and 8,620 acres in Tipperary.
8. The land was owned by the Stafford O'Brien family, and held on long leases by its tenants. See Marnane, 370.
9. See Marnane, 371.
10. This was days after tenants had removed belongings from their rental properties in anticipation of evictions, which subsequently began on December 2nd 1889. Houses and shops built at this time still exist at Emmet and Dillon Streets in Tipperary town.
11. William Lawrence's Great Bazaar and Photographic Galleries opened on Mar 20th 1865 at 5-7 Upper Sackville St., Dublin, and was destroyed during the Easter Rising of 1916. See Hannavy: pp750-752. For an extensive account of the Lawrence Studio, see Carville, 2005. According to a National Library of Ireland NLI Flickr commons user, the Northern Echo reported as early as April 10th 1890 on these Lawrence images being used in a slideshow.
12. It was named after the Plan of Campaign leader and local politician, and was opened on April 12th 1890. It was estimated that £30k had been spent on the building programme: 57 houses on Dillon and Parnell St (now Emmet Street), the William O'Brien Arcade site beside Church Well landmark, 26 timber houses for evicted sub-tenants on Bansha Road, 7 timber cottages on Galbally Road, 7 rural cottages built, and 200 acres of land rented for livestock. See Marnane, 371. The opening of New Tipperary was "attended by priests, a large number of M.P. s and the lord mayors of Dublin and Cork. [see Farmers' Journal 14.4.1890, United Ireland 19.4.1890, Tipperary People 18.4.1890]

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William O'Brien described it as a sort of Mecca to the pilgrims of Irish nationality [United Ireland 1.5.1890], and indeed excursions to New Tipperary were organized from several parts of Ireland". O'Shea, 101.

13. Gill was engineer and later assistant Tipperary county surveyor and town surveyor of Nenagh from around 1900 until 1922. He was the brother of (Irish Parliamentary Party) Member of Parliament T.P. Gill and father of 20th century Irish republican politician Tomás Mac Giolla. See Archiseek online record of New Tipperary, and the Irish Architectural Archive, Dictionary of Irish Architects online record for Gill. The Arcade design was influenced by the Dublin South City Market (now South Great George's St Arcade) from 1881. See Marnane p371, and Archiseek online record for Dublin South City Markets.

14. For example, functioning as a local butter market.

15. Benjamin, 406.

16. Variations on the theme include the terms 'dream collective', 'dream world' and 'dream house'.

17. Buck-Morss, 253.

18. Benjamin, 21.

19. Ibidem, 7.

20. For example, the Pall Mall Gazette April 3rd 1890. Available via JS Press Cuttings Flickr stream.

21. See Lister, 221.

22. See Marx, Chapter One, Part Four, "The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret", 163-177.

23. Mitchell, 7.

24. See, for example, Berger, 1972; Barrell, 1972, 1980, 1986; Bermingham, 1987; Williams, 38.

25. Storr, 45.

26. Freud, 553.

27. The sharp drop in funding was directly linked to the split in the Irish Parliamentary Party and the National League as a result of the scandal surrounding Charles Stewart Parnell's involvement in the O'Shea divorce case. See Foster, 400-428 for further elaboration of this political narrative.

28. The event saw a significant police presence to protect the demolition team. Reported on the next day in the Freeman's Journal and Daily Advertiser. Available via JS Press Cuttings Flickr stream.

29. Benjamin, 884.

30. O'Shea, 101, citing *United Ireland* 1.5.1890.

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CV

Feargal Fitzpatrick. Head of the Department of Fine Art Media at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, Ireland, and a doctoral candidate at Maynooth University, under the supervision of Dr. Colin Graham and Professor Luke Gibbons. His PhD research project is entitled *Ireland, Landscape and Nineteenth-Century Photography*. It is a contemporary theoretical reading of a discontinuous field that, up to now, has been dealt with largely on an empirical or historical basis. In a partially chronological frame, it examines: The Military Observer; The Invisible Famine; Big House Photographers; The Rise and Fall of New Tipperary; and Imaging and Imagining Eviction. Its purpose is to generate a critical reading of representations of Ireland's geographical spaces in a period of immense political upheaval preceding Ireland's War of Independence, partition, establishment of the Irish Free State and civil war in the early twentieth century.